PERSPECTIVES
ON PARLIAMENT

WHAT IS DIGITAL DEMOCRACY?

Digital democracy, also known as e-participation, is a process where people are able to participate in politics using information and communications technology (ICT) based.

Activities such as finding political updates online, commenting on political activity, downloading campaign software, joining online petitions/movements, and signing up for electronic bulletins are just a few examples of digital democracy.[1] Being able to participate in these kinds of ways makes the political process and crucial information more accessible to citizens.

Digital democracy is directly concerned with bringing politics into the 21st century. Discussions about democracy are beginning to emphasis the fact that certain factors - such as age, gender, class, and location - are likely to affect how much people are able to participate.

Discourse on digital democracy takes into consideration factors that could affect the participation of all people, such as: age of citizens, gender, level of education, class, race, access to the internet and time.[2] By using online tools, citizens are able to participate more regularly, instead of only voting every five years. The lawmaking process and elections are just two areas that can be improved by technology. It can also improve public service, and promote transparency and accountability. However it must be noted that, while technological advances are often available to governments, they are not always used for transformation.

[1] https://www.khaleejtimes.com/technology/what-is-digital-democracy-and-what-can-it-do-for-you Jafarkarimi, Sim, Sadaatdoost and Hee, 2014, p. 642
[2] Ibid

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

THE 21st century has been unofficially called the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, because of the countless ways that technology has completely changed how we live. The internet, combined with more people having access to internet-capable devices, has meant that people living in the 21st century are more connected to each other than ever before.

While technology has definitely affected the way that people are able to communicate with each other, its effects can also be felt in many areas of our lives. That includes the areas of our lives concerned with political participation. In our review of the Namibian parliament for the year 2018[3], we highlighted that continued effort to digitise parliament is commendable and should ideally be complemented with much needed reform. These improvements would include making sure that new technology is easy to use, as well as making sure that information databases are synced with any new technology. These kinds of changes would prepare the government to be active participants in the e-participation (or electronic participation) process.

[3] See https://ippr.org.na/publication/year-in-review-2018/

How does technology help democracy?

The word democracy means "the people rule". There are some people who believe that any country that holds regular, free and fair elections counts as a democracy, because the people have the power to choose their leaders. However, most countries, including Namibia, recognise that there are many more criteria that need to be met. Some of these include people's economic and social well-being. Another important criteria is access to information.

For an election to be democratic, people need to have all the information they need to make an informed decision. This includes knowledge about the voting process, the principles of the candidates and parties running, and information about how the current government has performed. Technology, when used responsibly, can spread this information further, faster and more accurately than word of mouth. Smartphones, tablets, email, websites, and even social media are all different aspects of technology that can be used to improve democracy.

Technology and Democracy

Pros: Supporters of technology say that it improves access to information, for both individuals and stakeholders. Voters are able to participate in elections with the knowledge they need to make an informed decision at the polls. Stakeholders (such as government, civil society and the media) are also able to share information. In particular, access to the internet has created platforms for public debate and space for people to create communities around similar issues. This has often resulted in increased citizen participation when political action has gone beyond voting.

Cons: Online political participation often does not go beyond basic information sharing. Some people argue that public demonstrations and physical petitions are more effective in certain contexts than online petitions. Other limitations such as access to the internet and the affordability of mobile data weaken effective participation. Digital campaigning during election years, in particular, can create an uninformed electorate if political parties rely too heavily on online information sharing. This is particularly important in rural areas, and for those who don't have access to the internet. This can create a higher risk of political polarization.

Depending on the type of system used to elect officials, democracy can be representative or direct. In a representative democracy like Namibia, citizens vote for individuals or political parties to make decisions on their behalf. In a direct democracy, there is no middle man, and people have the power to decide on policies themselves. While both systems have their own pros and cons, one important thing to note about representative democracies is that, for the most part, they do not allow voters to hold individuals accountable. Instead, political parties are held accountable, which can make it more difficult to address individuals in government that are problematic. Because of this, it is even more important that citizens have all the necessary information about the principles and policies of political parties before they vote.

Being an informed voter means being knowledgeable about the agenda of the representatives they are in favour of. Often, the risk of an uninformed electorate is voter apathy, which is the decision of the voter to abstain from voting because of disinterest or the absence of appealing candidates/representative. If voters are given necessary and relevant information before elections, the chances of them voting is higher because they are more aware of the impact of their choices.

The question is, how can technology be used to improve political participation, and good governance?[4]

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[4] Good governance has 8 major characteristics. It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. It assures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future needs of society. See https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/good-governance.pdf

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

Digital democracy does not only improve democracy - it can bring it about. Social media has been a tool used by activists all around the world to share their experiences of injustice and oppression, and to organise protest action.

Social Media as Protest

In 2010, a series of protests and uprisings occurred in several North African countries, starting with Tunisia. The hashtag *#ArabSpring* was used by many activists and civilians on the ground to communicate with each other, raise awareness and better organise themselves against the government response to protest, which was often military deployment.

In 2015, a wave of protests swept over universities in South Africa as students demanded not only lower fees, but also an overall transformation of university culture, which was deemed racist, classist and patriarchal. Using the hashtag *#FeesMustFall*, students and supporters across the country mobilised, shutting down universities and raising awareness in the general public. This protest was at its peak during the *#TotalShutdown*, during which universities across the country shut down simultaneously and protests were organised.

In 2018, Nigerian youth organised themselves and ran an online campaign *#NotTooYoungToRun*, seeking to reduce the age limit for running for elected public office in Nigeria. This resulted in a bill being signed by the Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari, to reduce age limits to public office: the age requirement for governorship positions dropped from 35 to 30, and the age requirement for an eligible presidential candidate was lowered from 40 to 35. The success of this campaign has since inspired the United Nations to initiate a similar global campaign which aims to promote young people's right to run for public office and address the issue of age discrimination.

FAKE NEWS: A MODERN PHENOMENON

Collins Dictionary Words of the Year 2017[5]

Fake News (ˌfeɪk ˈnjuːz)
noun: false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting.

President Donald Trump of the United States of America popularized the term by labeling almost anything he did not agree with on social media as "fake news". However comical it seemed at the time, the spread of fake news is a threat to e-participation as it undermines users political right to digital democracy. It's agenda is to mislead, cause confusion or push for a specific agenda. Fake news has often been used as motivation by governments to censor social media. Whilst businesses often take advantage of the satire nature of fake news to advertise and market their products and services as well as raise brand awareness.

Types of fake news:[6]

1. **Click-bait:** These stories that are deliberately fabricated to gain more website visitors and increase advertising revenue for websites. Clickbait stories use sensational headlines to grab attention and drive click-throughs to the publisher website, normally at the expense of truth or accuracy.
2. **Propaganda:** Stories that are created to deliberately mislead audiences, promote a biased point of view or particular political cause or agenda.
3. **Satire/Parody:** Lots of websites and social media accounts publish stories based on false information for entertainment and parody.
4. **Sloppy Journalism:** Sometimes reporters or journalists may publish a story with unreliable information or without checking all of the facts which can mislead audiences.
5. **Misleading Headlines:** Stories that are not completely false can be distorted using misleading or sensationalist headlines. These types of news can spread quickly on social media sites where only headlines and small snippets of the full article are displayed on audience newsfeeds.
6. **Biased/Slanted News:** Many people are drawn to news or stories that confirm their own beliefs or biases and fake news can prey on these biases. Social media news feeds tend to display news and articles that they think we will like based on our personalised searches

How to spot fake news:[7]
1. Check if the website is credible
2. Look beyond the headline
3. Check for trustworthy sources
4. Check the facts
5. Check your biases
6. Is it a joke?

Useful fact-checking sites:
- *Namibia Fact Check:* https://namibiafactcheck.org.na/
- *Snopes:* https://snopes.com/
- *Fact Check:* https://factcheck.org/

[5] See https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/11/02/cuffing-season-corbynmania-named-words-year-collins-dictionary/

[6] See https://www.webwise.ie/teachers/what-is-fake-news/

[7] Adapted from 'Explained: What is Fake News'. See: https://www.webwise.ie/teachers/what-is-fake-news/

DIGITAL POLITICS IN NAMIBIA

The need for voter education is often strongly during election years, because the electorate needs information in order to effectively participate in this democratic process.

Namibia's Media Ombudsman, John Nakuta, this year criticised the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) for doing the bare minimum on voter education.[8] Voter education requires a multi-stakeholder approach, where many groups work together to reach as many people as possible. However, a lack of access to electoral information in Namibia remains a challenge. Regardless, there are those who have made it their mission to fill the gap and especially engage Namibia's very young voters using social media platforms.

Election Watch Namibia, an IPPR project, is not only a Facebook voter education platform but has also printed research material and analysis relating to democracy and Namibia's Electoral Cycle since 2014.[9]

The Informed Voters Project, is a local youth-driven initiative[10]. The project aims to educate Namibian citizens on the electoral and party systems, as well as the roles of the parliament and the ECN. This project uses digital media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn as its conduit for voter education.[11]
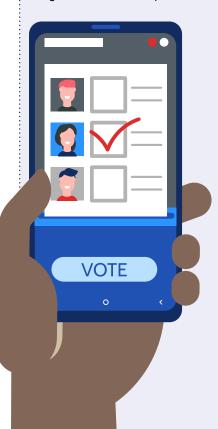
It is likely that we will see similar initiatives during the lead up to the national elections in November 2019. The ECN is also utilising its social media platforms such Facebook and Twitter to share information on their progress with election preparations.[12]

In Namibia, we also have examples of e-participation on topical issues, with the SMS page of the Namibian newspaper being an example of active e-participation. Over the years, this page has provided readers with an avenue to engage leaders as well as call for investigations on issues of corruption or mismanagement.

THE COST OF CONNECTION

Namibia has a large rural population that still heavily relies on radios as a form of accessing and sharing public information. As of 2018, Namibia was rated 29th out of 52 African countries, with the cheapest 1 Gigabyte mobile prepaid rate of 7.35 USD per month.This is cheaper than neighbouring countries such as South Africa (8.28 USD), Botswana (13.40 USD) and Angola (24.86 USD).[13] However this rating does not necessarily imply that more Namibians can afford data, or the smartphones needed to access the internet. The cost of technology is a barrier that prevents many people from participating in digital democracy.

Mobile Telecommunications Ltd (MTC) is Namibia's largest cellular access provider and over the last decade, MTC has prioritised improving coverage across the country (including in remote or sparsely populated areas), and claims 95 percent coverage across Namibia.[14] Therefore, while personal smartphone usage in Namibia has increased over the past ten years[15] and many young people are active on social media, it is still not clear whether that has translated into greater political participation across the country.

8   See https://www.namibian.com.na/77598/read/ECN-only-scratching-surface-on-voter-education
9   See https://www.facebook.com/electionwatchnamibia/
10   For more information contact Ms Kiito Shilongo, email: niitah467@gmail.com
11   See https://www.facebook.com/informedvotersnam/
12   See https://www.facebook.com/ElectoralCommissionOfNamibia/

13   See http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/24/c_137133842.htm
14   MTC, 2019. http://www.mtc.com.na/coverage
15   See https://www.namibian.com.na/index.php?id=101003&page=archive-read

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ABOUT DEMOCRACY REPORT

Democracy Report is a project of the IPPR which analyses and disseminates information relating to the legislative agenda of Namibia's Parliament. The project aims to promote public participation in debates concerning the work of Parliament by publishing regular analyses of legislation and other issues before the National Assembly and the National Council. Democracy Report is funded by the Embassy of Finland.

ABOUT THE IPPR

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) is a not-for-profit organisation with a mission to deliver independent, analytical, critical yet constructive research on social, political and economic issues that affect development in Namibia. The IPPR was established in the belief that development is best promoted through free and critical debate informed by quality research.

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Incorporated Association Not for Gain Registration Number 21/2000/468

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